'Most **Aboriginal** children are healthy and well-adjusted'

Mention **Aboriginals**, and the stereotypical images that come to mind are often bleak. Yes, First Nations, Inuit and Metis struggle with above-average risks of getting seriously sick from a wide variety of ailments, notes Jeff Reading, scientific director of the Institute of **Aboriginal** Peoples' Health, part of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. But Reading says that's just part of the story -- a misleading one.

I want to emphasize the tremendous resilience and strength within the **Aboriginal** community. We can point to negative statistics, but the vast majority of **Aboriginals** are very healthy. In fact, I would characterize most of my **Aboriginal**friends as being healthier than most of my non-Native friends.

Say you have a rate of infant mortality that's one per cent in the Canadian population and maybe three per cent in the Native population. You still have rates of infant health that are 99 per cent and 97 per cent. But when it gets characterized as differential rates, there's a perception the entire community is sick. For example, **Aboriginal** youth. **Media** images portray children in Labrador sniffing gasoline. Anyone who's never been to a Native community might assume that's endemic. In fact, most of the children are healthy and well-adjusted. Definitely, we have problems, but we really have to balance the message.

One of the misconceptions about the Native community is that we're in a state of chaos and that we're unable to manage our own affairs. It ties back to the stigmatization. If you ask people -- and I've done this with first-year medical students -- "What are the problems in Native communities?" they'll start with physical violence, child abuse and all these dysfunctional patterns. Then I'll ask, "How many of you know an **Aboriginal** person?" Very few do.

Sometimes people think the **Aboriginal** community is a special interest group like any other, and we ought to just assimilate into the Canadian mainstream. Many people have a poor understanding of the historical context in which **Aboriginal**communities exist. I'd like them to see First Nations and **Aboriginals** as indigenous to this country before the arrival of Europeans. My [Tyendinaga Mohawk] reserve [in southeastern Ontario] signed a treaty with the Crown in the 1700s, almost 150 years before Canada became a nation state. When people say we're just another interest group, well, we think that's not true, and we have historical records to prove it.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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Interviewed by Danylo Hawaleshka

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